

Beaver Creek – the pinnacle of customer service

By Susan Wood

BEAVER CREEK – This service-oriented resort does everything but ski it for you.

And one could argue that sometimes they do. At least that's how Kae would describe her experience negotiating the famed Colorado resort's gnarliest run off the Birds of Prey chairlift. The double black diamond Golden Eagle run starts the Men's Downhill Course, home to the Alpine World Ski Championships set for 2015.

Kae, who identifies herself as more of an intermediate skier, had help on one of the world's three toughest downhill racing runs with a guide she felt at home with. Beaver Creek ski guide John "J.B." Bell, who hails from Truckee, is familiar with the terrain and the reality of feeling like he's skiing over his head. He recalled on our recent visit to the area how he skied at an amazing speed on the men's downhill run at Snowbasin outside Salt Lake City, home of the 2002 Winter Games. At the time, the run was labeled as the steepest racing run ever.



Kae only smiles before she sees the run; Sue smiles the

whole time. Photo/J.B.

“I thought: ‘J.B., you’re going too fast’,” he described as if he was flying. So he knew what an apprehensive Kae was going through.

“I’ve been a bodyguard on the slopes. So I hope they trust me enough that I’m there for them,” Bell said, using an example of a client who calls him every year to get that kind of assistance. He added that working in the beginning ski school hones a Beaver Creek employee’s patience.

It’s a good thing Bell was there as the guide and not me, otherwise Kae wouldn’t have spoken to me for the rest of the ski, food and wine trip.

It’s like this. Upon cruising down the run called Golden Eagle of the downhill course, a skier approaches an area called The Brink, a seemingly bottom-less lip where the grade tilts about 50 degrees and the entire valley below opens up miles away. Of course, there’s a right turn the racers will need to negotiate, rather than tangle with the trees.

“(The racers) fly off here at 80 mph,” Bell said.

The terrain was hard-packed with limited clumps of snow to use to turn. Most downhill runs are designed that way – hard and fast.

Bell proceeded by skiing in front of Kae, as if he would hurl his body on top of her if she fell and started sliding. She skidded over a challenging spot to a safe place, and I waited as the backup sweep.

I must admit. It was fun. I felt the adrenaline I haven’t experienced since skiing the Dave Murray Men’s Downhill run at Whistler-Blackcomb, home to the 2010 Winter Games.

Afterward, the three of us looked up at the steep grade,

sighed and continued toward the Larkspur Express chair. Along the way, Bell pointed out how the Women's Downhill Run starting at Peregrine meets the men's course at the Kestrel run. It took 700 days of dedication to carve out the women's racing run.

It dawned at me that Bell is in the right job at the right place. And not just because he was the most qualified person to safely and confidently get Kae down the slick double-black racing run. I witnessed his poise all morning during last month's Food and Wine Festival ski day. He helped two 5-year-old children on and off the chairlift, stayed friendly with everyone he met and provided pointers for us.

Upon skiing the superior snow of the Rose Bowl chairlift area, Bell talked us into taking a leap of faith and ski with our two poles suspended in front of us like a platter. The exercise was intended to keep our upper body level and hands in front. If the poles tilted, "you dropped your wine glasses," he joked.

Beaver Creek's attentive experience goes way beyond ski instruction and guidance from a coach with a 30-year background. The mantra of providing excellent service is engrained in every practice, every product, every employee. That's why its advertising tagline "Not exactly roughing it" seems so fitting. Even Mamie's Cabin for the casual-faire declares on a sign "only slightly roughing it."

There are the warm chocolate chip cookies handed out at the base at 3:30pm, gourmet hot chocolate given away at the top of the Centennial Express Chairlift and a variety of cabins where residents have access to these isolated culinary hideaways.

And beyond those offerings, Beaver Creek operates with an overriding service program in which the employees provide suggestions to improve a guest experience. The program is extensive and serious.

The staffers at Beaver Creek may strike the guests as a little older than the more-common, young, ski-bum types living between high school and college or career path.

“We want to be the industry leader in guest service. And that means being proactive,” Beaver Creek spokeswoman Jen Brown told Lake Tahoe News. “We have a little more of a mature audience serviced by mature employees.”

Take Beaver Creek shuttle bus driver Ned Weiss, a single senior from Ohio who comes up to Colorado for the winter to work.

“I came here for the great benefits,” he said. Of course, as with all age groups, access to superior skiing conditions tops the list of benefits. He’s friendly, helpful and forthright.

Despite all the pampering, one cannot reduce Beaver Creek to a ski bunny hill where riders spend more time having every whim addressed than carving serious turns. Much of the terrain, like the Birds of Prey area, is not for the faint of heart. Eight high-speed chairlifts service more than 30 black diamond runs, adding up to a 4,000-plus foot vertical drop. Then, there’s the Stone Creek Chutes on the backside. And that’s just the advanced terrain.

Whatever the territory, the mountain stretching to 11,400 feet with 1,815 acres of ski terrain comes with skiing ambassadors who roam the grounds.

The ski resort is even kind to the resident elk herds who also meander through the landscape by providing tree “islands” consisting of clusters of trees on Bachelor Gulch side of the resort. At its base, a Ritz-Carlton stands to further the extraordinary guest-service experience. (Note: more on that in this article.)

History

- Beaver Creek opened Dec. 15,1980, with six chairlifts and a temporary base lodge. Development costs ran \$300 million.
- The decade brought much growth to the resort with the opening of the Larkspur Bowl and the unveiling of the Centennial Express chairlift from the village base.
- In 1989, the World Ski Championship came to Beaver Creek.
- In the following decade, Grouse Mountain at Beaver Creek opened. In the later years, the Arrowhead Ski Area was connected to the resort.
- The Birds of Prey area was developed and included an express chairlift in 2003 to accommodate the resort's quest to be a dominant force in hosting the World Alpine Ski Championships.
- In 2004, the town lift that crosses Highway 6 was put in to take skiers from the Lower Beaver Creek area to the upper side.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)